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# JOHN THE BAPTIST

*A Drama in Which is Presented the  
Social and Political Background of the  
Life of Jesus*



BY

ALBERT N. CORPENING

Marseilles, Illinois

December 25, 1935

Dear Sir:

Kindly accept this complimentary copy of my book, John the Baptist. Since the supply is limited, I am sending copies almost exclusively to representative members of the Baptist denomination, my denomination.

The time spent in its composition was a real pleasure. I hope you may enjoy reading it and find it useful.

Yours sincerely,

Robert W. Boyer

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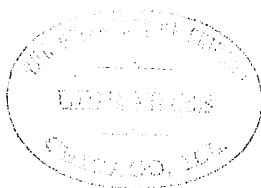
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## PREFACE

*For some time, I have been pondering upon the question of how to get people in our churches to understand the social and political unrest in Palestine at the time that Jesus began his ministry. It is to be hoped that the present experiment will not be entirely futile. The Biblical material is used uncritically and attempts to portray the relations between John the Baptist and Jesus that the Gospel writers intended to present to their readers. The social and political conditions are true to the times, but are sublimated to the play as a whole.*

---THE AUTHOR.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOHN THE BAPTIST, a prophet of thirty years of age.

JESUS, Messiah at age of thirty.

ZACHARIAS, aged father of the Baptist.

ELIZABETH, aged mother of the Baptist.

VIRGIN MARY, a beautiful girl in her teens.

HEROD ANTIPAS, tetrarch of Galilee, thirty years to date.

HERODIAS, wife of Herod Philip, companion of Herod Antipas, beautiful mother of Salome.

SALOME, daughter of Herod Philip and Herodias, a beautiful girl in her middle or early teens.

PETER, oldest disciple of Jesus, fisherman by trade.

ANDREW, brother of Peter, disciple of Jesus, fisherman.

JAMES, disciple of Jesus, likewise a fisherman.

JOHN, brother of James, disciple of Jesus, fisherman.

A Baby, representing John the Baptist at eight days of age.

Women, three or more.

Men, several, the more the better.

Priests, at least two.

Levites, in company with priests. Any number.

Soldiers, at least three.

Tax-collectors, two or more, probably wealthy in appearance.

Officials, two or more.

Lords, two or more.

Chief Captains, two or more.

Disciples of John, at least four.

# JOHN THE BAPTIST

## ACT ONE

Time: 4 B. C.

Scene 1. *Temple at Jerusalem. Zacharias the priest leaves the people praying outside and enters the door of the temple before the altar of incense. He mechanically lights the incense. The voice of the people is heard from without as they pray for the coming of the Messiah.*

*Zacharias:* How the people pray! Their souls are oppressed because of the Romans and the influence of the Greeks in the land. It is no wonder. This land is ours, given us by the Lord in the days of our fathers. It was conquered by Joshua and organized under Saul and David. This city of Zion, the holy Jerusalem, is the city of our God. Here was Solomon's temple, the envy of the world. But wicked kings wrecked the kingdom. Then this holy city and the temple of the Lord were destroyed, burned with fire.—It was then that Ezekial heard God's promise that the Son of man would come.—How time passes! The temple was rebuilt, but dishonor followed dishonor. All the nations trampled Israel under their feet. Here has been the battleground of the world and Israel has suffered under the oppression of all. Even this temple, built by Herod, suffers in the presence of Roman soldiers, strange customs, and foreign sports and spectacles that win our youth. See how few young people are yonder praying! When this generation has passed what will become of Israel? (*He kneels with uplifted face begins to pray.*) O Yahweh, Lord of our fathers, how long shall we have to wait? How long—O how long? I had hoped to see Messiah in my day, but now I am old and have not even a son that my seed may see the day of thy deliverance.

(*Gabriel appears beside the altar. Zacharias looks up, startled and amazed.*)

*Gabriel:* Fear not, Zacharias; for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou

shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

*Zacharias*: Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well stricken with years.

*Gabriel*: I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

*(Gabriel withdraws. Zacharias, with happy face, returns to the people, but cannot speak. He raises his hands in a silent, joyous benediction. They perceive that he has seen a vision.)*

Scene 2: *A village in Judea. The aged Elizabeth sits on a blanket, chanting.*

*Elizabeth*: Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up thy hand:  
Forget not the poor.  
Wherefore doeth the wicked condemn God,  
And say in his heart. "Thou wilt not require  
it?"  
Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief  
and spite, to require it with thy hand;  
The helpless committeth himself unto thee;  
Thou has been the helper of the fatherless.  
Break thou the arm of the wicked;

And as for the evil man, seek out his wickedness  
till thou find none.

The Lord is King for ever and ever :

The nations are perished out of his land.

O Lord, thou hast heard the desire of the meek :

Thou shalt prepare their hearts, thou wilt cause  
thine ear to hear ;

To judge the fatherless and the oppressed,

That man who is of the earth may be terrible no  
more.

(Psalm 10:12-18)

*(The Virgin Mary enters)*

*Virgin Mary:* Hail, my cousin Elizabeth.

*Elizabeth, rising and embracing Mary, speaks loud and exultantly.* Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ear, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believeth: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

*Mary:* My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low state of his handmaiden: for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent away empty. He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

Scene 3: *A village in Judea. Elizabeth, holding the eight-day-old child in her arms, is surrounded by neighboring women. Zacharias and several men look on. Occasion: the circumcision of the child.*

*First Woman:* He is eight days old today. I have seen him every day.

*Second Woman:* I held him first

*Third Woman:* I wove his blanket.

*Elizabeth:* Ye have all been good. God hath given me my desire. For years I have prayed for a son. Now is my disgrace removed. It is good for you to rejoice with me, even in my old age. The Lord is good.

*Women:* The Lord is good.

*Second Woman:* Look at me, little Zacharias; look at me.

*First Woman:* No, look at me, baby Zacharias.

*Elizabeth:* His name is not Zacharias.

*Women:* Not Zacharias?

*Second Woman:* Surely thou wilt name him after his father.

*Elizabeth:* Not so; he shall be called John.

*First Woman:* There is none of thy kindred that is called by that name.

*Third Woman:* Not a single one. Why wilt thou call him John? Surely, Zacharias is much better.

*First Woman:* Let us ask his father.

*Second Woman:* Zacharias will certainly want his son named after him. We shall ask him.

*(The women turn to Zacharias and in sign language ask him. He beckons for a writing table and writes.)*

*First Woman (Peering over his shoulder).* "His name is John."

*Other Women:* John!

*Men:* John? Did you say, "John?"

*Zacharias, speaking exultantly.* Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he sware to our father Abraham, that he would grant unto us, that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

## ACT TWO

Time: 26 A. D.

Place: *The Jordan River at Bethabara, near the southern tip of Galilee.*

Scene 1: *Peter, Andrew, James, and John are sitting together in the late evening, talking.*

*Andrew:* How are our rations holding out, James?

*James:* We have sufficient food for awhile yet, Andrew. Simon and I went a fishing in the Jordan this afternoon and caught a nice mess of fish. There remain yet a few figs and several barley cakes.

*Andrew:* Good. We shall not suffer for food so long as we are near the Jordan. If four fishermen can't eat when they dwell by the river, they deserve not the name.

*Peter:* My wife cooked those cakes. They are good with the fish. She has no equal in the preparation of food.

*Andrew:* I see not how thou hast stayed away these two weeks, Simon. It is the longest period thou hast been separated from her these twenty and three years.

*Peter:* True it is; but blame me not. One cannot see a John the Baptizer any day.

*Andrew:* No, one cannot. I am not certain that I shall ever return to my nets at Capernaum. The Baptizer saith that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Do ye suppose the Messiah will come down out of heaven in sight of all?

*James:* That is what some of the scribes tell us.

*Peter:* Of course he will. The Romans will be routed. We shall drive them out of the country. This good arm and sword will be beside him.

*James:* So shall mine. Messiah will ride a great white horse and will carry a sword in his hand. He shall wreck



vengeance on the Romans; the horse will become red, and we shall all wade through their blood in the streets.

*Andrew:* Perhaps Messiah will make us captains.

*Peter:* We may get to go to Rome.

*Andrew:* Thy wife will not permit thee to go. She would have no one to fish for her.

*Peter:* I shall take her with me.

*John:* What think ye of the teachings of those men which came from Jerusalem today? They say that Messiah will have no need of soldiers. All he will need to do will be to speak the word, breathe forth thundering and lightnings against the Romans, and they will be routed and slain.

*James:* If he be like that, he will have no need of soldiers; but I think he will use soldiers and have a regular bodyguard as the scribes say David had.

*Peter:* What does John the Baptizer say about it? I shall believe him rather than them.

*John:* He says nothing about that. He is only interested that the people prepare for the Messiah's coming. The scribes say that if all the people would be righteous for one day only, Messiah would come. John the Baptizer seems to think the same way about it, for he is asking every body to repent.

*Peter:* Messiah will soon be here then. Saw ye the crowds come today? They are like the sands on the seashore. John was baptizing and preaching all the while we were fishing. We could see all from where we were.

*John:* I was close by and could hear every word he said. There were some priests who came for baptism and soldiers and tax-collectors and elders and just about everybody.

*Andrew:* The Baptizer was so tired that I asked him

to come to eat with us, but he would not. He said that he ate no fish nor other meat and drinks no wine.

*John:* What eats he then?

*Andrew:* Locusts and wild honey.

*James:* I shall stay close by him until Messiah comes. Methinks he will be the highest official in the new kingdom, perhaps a general. We shall be repaid if we support him. He likes us anyway.

*John:* He said something today which I was about to forget.

*James:* Tell us about it.

*John:* He said, "There is one among you whom ye know not, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose."

*Peter:* Said he that?

*John:* He did.

*Andrew:* What else did he say?

*John:* He said something about this man baptizing with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

*Andrew:* That must be the Messiah; but what means he by his baptizing with the Holy Ghost and with fire?

*Peter:* It sounds not like a general to me.

*James:* Nor to me either. It means, however, that Messiah is here already. I wonder if that be true.

*Peter:* Who can it be?

*John:* I think the Baptizer himself does not know.

*Peter:* The Baptizer may know, but refuses to tell until everything is ready.

*Andrew:* But if this man baptizes with the Holy Ghost and with fire, what kind of a Messiah is he? What preparation will have to be made?

*James:* That remains to be seen. In the meantime, we had better get some rest. The hour is late. There may be much ado to-morrow.

*Peter (yawning):* I am not sleepy.

*Andrew:* It is time for me to find a place to lie down.  
(*Rises and goes out.*)

(*Peter yawns again.*)

*James:* I am going to walk beside the river for a little while. (*Exit. John rises and follows. Peter remains sitting a moment, musing, then he stretches out on the ground, relaxes, and sleeps.*)

Scene 2: *Bethabara, the following day. Many men. Among them are Peter, James, and John talking with John the Baptist.*

*Peter:* You say that the Messiah is already here, and that the people know it not?

*The Baptizer:* Yea. He is here. My spirit telleth me it is true, but I know not which is he.

*John:* Perhaps we know him already and know not that we know him.

*The Baptizer:* It is quite possible that ye do.

*James:* When think ye that he will reveal himself?

*The Baptizer:* Surely not yet, for there is still too much wickedness in Israel.

*Peter:* Think ye he will overthrow Herod Antipas and his Roman soldiers and then march against Pilate at Jerusalem?

*The Baptizer:* How can I know what he will do? I am only a forerunner to prepare his way and announce his coming.

*Peter:* Methinks he will, and then he will send a legion to drive out Philip the tetrarch and the tetrarch Lysanius. All their mighty fortresses will fall like mere tents before his onslaught. A little while and he will be marching on Rome itself and drive out Tiberius Caesar. Fifteen years are enough for such a tyrant. I have my sword with me and shall march immediately by him.

*John:* So shall I.

*Andrew:* And I.

*James:* And I.

*Peter:* The Zealots will all support him too. Many of them are here now trying to stir up the people, and all are armed.

*The Baptizer:* I fear ye shall all be disappointed, if that is what ye want to do. Last night a strange vision came to me—One that I cannot understand. In it, I was commanded to announce the Lamb of God. Can Messiah be the Lamb of God? "Lamb" seems to signify a sacrifice for sins.

*John:* Lamb of God! One who is sacrificed for sins! Is Messiah to bear the sins of the people? I thought that the people must be free from sin before he came.

*Andrew:* Perhaps he will restore the kingdom of David first.

*The Baptizer:* That I cannot tell. I am only his messenger, a voice crying out in the wilderness.

*James:* This is an opportune time for him to come. The people continue to come here in multitudes. Here come some dignitaries from Jerusalem. Will they be baptized too? (*Enter some priests and Levites.*)

*First Priest:* Which is he that is called the Baptizer?

*Andrew:* Here he is.

*The Baptizer:* I am he. Speak.

*First Priest:* Strange reports have come to us at Jerusalem of thy message and power. This multitude indicates a mighty following. If thou art the Christ, we of Jerusalem want to know it and cooperate with thee in the restoration of the kingdom. Who art thou?

*The Baptizer:* I am not the Christ.

*First Priest:* What then? Art thou Elijah?

*The Baptizer:* I am not.

*First Priest:* Art thou that prophet?

*The Baptizer:* No.

*Second Priest:* Who art thou? Tell us that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?

*The Baptizer:* I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. "Make straight the way of the Lord," as saith the prophet Isaiah.

*A Levite:* Why then dost thou baptize, if thou are not that Christ, nor Elijah, neither that Prophet?

*The Baptizer:* I baptize with water, but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who, coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His path straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough way shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (*He turns to the people and continues.*)

Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins. Messiah cometh. Make straight his paths. Retard not ~~not~~ his coming with wickedness and sin. Thwart not his course with greed and avarice. Great shall be the Saviour and great his salvation; but he awaiteth the hour of our preparation. Ye come from everywhere to be bap-

tized. O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, "We have Abraham to our father:" for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also, the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

*People:* What shall we do then?

*The Baptizer:* He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.

*Tax-gatherers:* Master, what shall we do?

*The Baptizer:* Ye tax-gatherers, exact no more than that which is appointed you.

*Soldiers:* And what shall we do?

*The Baptizer:* Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.

*People:* Is not this the Christ?

*The Baptizer:* I indeed baptize you with water, but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner, but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable. (*Jesus enters.*) Hail, Jesus, my kinsman. What dost thou here?

*Jesus:* I too, come for baptism, John.

*The Baptizer:* During thy whole life, I have never seen a fault in thee. I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?

*Jesus:* Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.

*The Baptizer:* As thou wilt; not as I wish. (*Exeunt*)

Scene 3: *Bethabara. John the Baptist stands with a number of followers.*

*Peter:* Thou saidst yesterday that the Messiah was already here. Art thou sure of it?

*The Baptizer:* Yes, Simon, I am sure. I have seen him.

*All:* Thou hast seen him?

*Andrew:* What is he like? What manner of man is he?

*John:* Will he announce himself?

*Zealot:* I must hasten to tell the other Zealots. We shall be ready to strike with him before nightfall. (*Starts to go out.*)

*The Baptizer:* Wait. Go not yet. He is not like the Messiah you expect. He will lead no army.

*Zealot:* Not going to lead an army? Then how can he be Messiah?

*The Baptizer:* He is going to save the people from their sins. For that he needs no weapons of yours.

*Zealot:* That cannot be. God saves the people from their sins. Messiah will drive out the Romans and establish the throne of David. If Messiah is here, we shall fight for him.

*The Baptizer:* You may fight indeed; but you must fight sins and all kinds of wickedness: greed that oppresses the poor, selfishness that permits the widows and orphans to starve, adultery, cursing, drunkenness, and the like.

*Zealot:* What would happen to the Romans? Are they to continue to oppress us? Is not the throne of David to be restored?

*The Baptizer:* God may drive out the Romans. Messiah will save us from our sins. Is not that more important?

*Priest:* You seem to forget that we are the children of Abraham and have the law, the temple and the sacrifices. We need no Messiah to save us from sin.

*The Baptizer:* Have I not told you that God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones? The law and the temple have not yet saved Israel, and it will take a greater sacrifice than one of sheep and oxen to save a rebellious people. Messiah is the Lamb of God—God's sacrifice for us.

*Zealot:* Impossible! Messiah is to establish the kingdom of David. He may appear as meek as a lamb until he gets his armies organized. Then he will drive out the Romans.

*(Jesus enters and approaches John.)*

*The Baptizer:* Behold the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me cometh a man which is preferred before me:" for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizes with the Holy Ghost." And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.

*Scene 4: Bethabara. The following day, the Baptizer and two of his disciples, Andrew and John, stand talking.*

*John:* Thinkest thou that Jesus is really the Messiah?

*The Baptizer:* I thought it not until he came for baptism; then I saw the Spirit descend on him, just as I was told in my vision. He has no equal in virtue. I did



not want to baptize him, but he would have it so.

*John*: Sayest thou that he is thy cousin?

*The Baptizer*: Yea. Our mothers were cousins.

*Andrew*: Were not the people surprised when thou saidst that he was the Messiah?

*The Baptizer*: They were indeed. Most of them had never seen him, and all who knew him thought of him only as the carpenter of Nazareth.

*John*: The priests and Levites shook their heads. They will never accept him.

*Andrew*: Saw ye the Zealots as he passed through the crowd? They were giving signs to one another, and one of their leaders was following him. They will have a whole army behind him soon.

*The Baptizer*: Not behind him. Jesus will not be fighting with swords and spears. Did I not tell you that he is the Lamb of God?

*Andrew*: Yea, 'tis true; but it is reasonable that Messiah will deliver us from the Romans and cleanse the land of the Greeks.

*John*: If he does not lead armies, how then will he win the support of the nation. He will have great difficulty in convincing the people that he is the Messiah.

*The Baptizer*: I know not. I only know that he is the lamb of God. (*Jesus enters and passes by, then goes out.*) Behold the lamb of God!

(*So commanding is this statement that Andrew and John turn and follow Jesus. The Baptizer watches them depart, smiles, and raises his face to heaven in silent prayer.*)

Scene 5: *Wilderness in Galilee, near the Jordan. John the Baptist sits on the ground surrounded by his other disciples.*

*First Disciple:* Rabbi, we were discussing the question of purification today with some of the Jews. Many of them are not nearly so careful as we. Only the Pharisees, the Essenes, and we strictly observe these laws.

*The Baptizer:* Those who are corrupted by sin do not realize the need of purification.

*Second Disciple:* It is said that he who was with thee beyond the Jordan requireth not of his disciples the ceremonial washing of the hands before eating.

*The Baptizer:* My father was Zacharias, the priest. He taught that the ceremonial washing was necessary. It is true that the cleansing within is more important than the cleansing without.

*Second Disciple:* Then why dost thou require of us the ceremonial cleansing?

*The Baptizer:* Who am I to change the law and the prophets? I preach the message of repentance and baptism and proclaim the teachings of the prophets. It is mine to prepare the way of Messiah by turning the people from their sins, not the turning of them from the law.

*First Disciple:* Some say that the ceremonial washing of the hands is not of the law.

*The Baptizer:* It is not in the law of Moses; it is in the tradition of the fathers.

*First Disciple:* Rabbi, why didst thou not follow in the steps of thy father Zacharias as a priest?

*The Baptizer:* The Spirit of the Lord taught me that I should turn the people from their sins, not sacrifice for sins committed.

*First Disciple:* Was not thy father Zacharias disappointed that thou didst not continue thy studies for the priesthood?

*The Baptizer:* My father died before I reached the age of twelve. I knelt before him as he placed his hands on my head and said, "My son, in thy day, Messiah cometh. Thine it shall be to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." When I had grown older, I beheld the corruption of Israel and fled from it into the wilderness. There the Spirit of the Lord found me and drove me again into the haunts of men to proclaim the kingdom of Messiah and prepare his way.

*Second Disciple:* Rabbi, why didst thou teach us a prayer that differs from that of the scribes and Pharisees?

*The Baptizer:* The scribes and Pharisees are as strict as we in the observance of the law and of the traditions of the Fathers. Their fasts and purifications are like our own, but they glory in them instead of working righteousness; therefore, their prayers lack humility and oftentimes sincerity. Nevertheless, we all pray for Messiah. The prayer I have taught you is not only for Messiah to come, but is an expression of repentance for sin and a dedication of life for social righteousness.

*(Two other disciples enter. One speaks)*

*Third Disciple:* Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou bearest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.

*The Baptizer:* A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice; this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.

## ACT THREE

*Galilee . 26 or 27 A. D.*

Scene 1: *Sepphoris, capital of Galilee, five miles from Nazareth. Herod Antipas and Herodias sit in the judgment hall. Soldiers stand in the background.*

*Herod Antipas*: I have a surprise for thee, my love.

*Herodias*: How nice of thee! Tell me what it is.

*Herod Antipas*: Not yet: We shall soon see.

*Herodias*: Is it a present from Rome? I saw the messengers arriving awhile ago and saw the slaves carrying in the treasures under escort of soldiers. Tell me. Is it a new Persian gown?

*Herod Antipas*: No, it is not a Persian gown. That would have come by way of Damascus or Antioch.

*Herodias*: Oh, it must be a new ring like the one Agrippina wears. I am most desirous for one like hers.

*Herod Antipas*: I shall not disappoint thee too much. I have, indeed, a gift from Rome that shall be delivered before the set of sun. But I have a real surprise for thee today. (*A soldier enters and salutes.*) Is my order carried out?

*Soldier*: The prisoner is without, your Excellency.

*Herod Antipas*: Bring him in.

(*Exit soldier who returns immediately with two other soldiers and John the Baptizer as a prisoner. Outside is heard the murmuring of the people who are demanding the release of the Baptizer.*)

*Herodias, in scorn*: I hope this is not the surprise thou hast for me!

*Herod Antipas*: Whom dost thou think this is?

*Herodias*: I know not, but judging from his camel's

hair garment and his unkempt appearance, he must be a man of the wilderness.

*Herod Antipas*: He is more than that. Multitudes from the whole country have been resorting to him in the wilderness, and it is said that he is plotting a revolution. Many armed Zealots were found with those following him, and had not our soldiers been well prepared, I doubt not, but that there would have been a battle. He hath also been talking about thee.

*Herodias*: About me! How dare he do so!

*Herod Antipas*: Nevertheless, he has. Prisoner, what is thy name?

*The Baptizer*: My name is John, your Excellency.

*Herod Antipas*: What is thy nativity?

*The Baptizer*: I was born in a village of Judea, your Excellency; there I dwelt until three years ago when I dwelt apart in the wilderness of Judea.

*Herod Antipas*: Why camest thou into Galilee?

*The Baptizer*: Your Excellency, He that commanded me to preach, bound me not to Judea.

*Herod Antipas*: Art thou a prophet then?

*The Baptizer*: I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord. Messiah cometh."

*Herod Antipas*: How dost thou know that Messiah is coming? When dost thou think he will arrive?

*The Baptizer*: He that told me to preach commanded me to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

*Herod Antipas*: My spies tell me that thou also preachest against me and against my authority.

*The Baptizer*: Your Excellency, what I said then, I say now. That woman who sits beside thee is not thine.

She is thy brother Philip's wife. Thou shouldst not have her.

*Herodias*: The babbling fool!

*Herod Antipas*: What is that to thee?

*The Baptizer*: Your Excellency, as the highest official in Galilee, the people look to thee for leadership. Thou art making the people to sin. Messiah cometh and will gather all the good grain into the granaries, but the chaff will be cast into the fire. The covetous, the adulterers, the drunkards, the oppressors of the poor cannot stand before him. This woman is thy brother's wife. It is not lawful for thee to have her.

*Herod Antipas*: Enough of that. What about the soldiers? Art thou helping to organize them for the overthrow of the government?

*The Baptizer*: As the Lord liveth, your Excellency, I am only a voice crying in the wilderness. With soldiers I have noting to do.

*Herod Antipas*: My spies tell me the same; nevertheless, the Zealots are gaining recruits rapidly among the crowds that follow thee under the stimulus of thy preaching. I am committing thee to prison. Perhaps thou wilt change thy mind about my brother Philip's wife. Thy disciples will be permitted to visit thee. Guard! Take this man to prison and give him a cell with a window in it.

*(The soldiers salute and retire with John the Baptizer.)*

*Herodias*: Is that all thou are going to do with that dog? He ought to be killed. He must be put to death.

*Herod Antipas*: Perhaps he should be; but the people think he is a prophet. Just now it is not wise. It would almost certainly call forth an uprising.

*Herodias*: An uprising over that rustic? Thou must have lost thy senses as well as thy judgment.

*Herod Antipas*: No, I haven't. I have spies all over the country, and they report to me unusual unrest over the immediate expectation of the Messiah's coming. I am seizing several of the leaders and, as thou seest, am putting the "Voice in the Wilderness" where he can do no damage. But let us go. There are presents for thee.

*(He rises; she remains, pouting.)*

*Herodias*: I want not thy presents. Thou no longer lovest me, else thou wouldst not let this man insult me to my face without punishment.

*Herod Antipas, pulling her to her feet*: Why, my dear, thou knowest that I love thee—love thee well enough not to let thee go back to Philip and in the face of the criticism of the people.

*Herodias*: No, thou lovest me not, or thou wouldst have had him killed. How dare he! I hate him! I shall find a way.

*Herod Antipas*: Not without my consent, my sweet. But come! I have a ring for thee just like that of Agrippina, and some presents from Agrippina herself.

*Herodias*: Very well. I'll go, but I shall find a way.

Scene 2: *John the Baptizer in a small cell.*

*The Baptizer*: How long, O Lord? How long shall I be confined here? Why dost thou permit me to remain here because of the animosity of a debased woman? Surely, this is undeserved. Have I not been a faithful messenger?—Have I been too faithful? I pointed out my kinsman, Jesus, as thy sacrificial lamb, as thy Son. Was my wisdom a delusion? Was I mistaken? If not why languish I here? Messiah would surely have delivered his servant—would surely have delivered his servant.

*(Enter soldiers and two disciples.)*

*First Disciple:* Rabbi!

*The Baptizer:* Oh, ye have come. Speak! What did Jesus say?

*First Disciple:* It was all very strange. When we asked him, saying, "John the Baptizer hath sent us to ask thee if thou art the Christ or whether we should look for another," he answered us nothing. We waited, if perchance we would tell us later. Meanwhile, the throngs pressed about him, some seeking to be healed, others to hear his voice. Several hours passed. He then came to us and said, "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind received their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me."

*The Baptizer:* It is strange, indeed. Does Messiah dwell among the humble and preach to them as I have done? But I have done no miracles. Jesus is healing the diseases of men and raising the dead and preaching to the poor. Yet how different it is from the expectation of Israel! How does it fit with my vision of him as the sacrificial lamb of God? —If he is the lamb of God, who shall sacrifice him?—My soul hath strange forebodings of suffering and death; yet I cannot perceive the cause nor the method. Can Messiah and the lamb of God be the same? I had hoped for release from these walls. Would not Messiah have delivered his messenger?—My soul is troubled.

*Second Disciple:* Rabbi, hast thou any commands for us?

*The Baptizer:* No, faithful ones. Your fellows have brought me sufficient food for several days. Go now, and let not my sheep be scattered. Leave me alone now. My soul is troubled, and I cannot see the light. (*Exeunt disciples and soldiers.*) O Lord, my God, I cannot understand. Help me to see the light. Grant unto thy servant even a little light to scatter his darkness and dread and despair. Grant even a little light.



Scene 3: *Sepphoris. A bedroom in the palace. Herodias watches her daughter Salome in her preparation to dance before Herod Antipas in honor of his birthday.*

*Salome*: I must be at my prettiest today.

*Herodias*: Thou must, indeed. Thou must dance as thou hast never danced before, too. Antipas is half drunk with wine by this time and will reward thee well.

*Salome*: That is my hope. Perhaps he will buy me one of those dresses from India that is interwoven with all the gems of the orient, and plaited with threads of drawn gold. You remember those we saw in Alexandria.

*Herodias*: That would cost as much as the revenue of all Galilee for a year, I fear. But what wouldst thou ask for thyself if he should say that thou mightest have whatsoever thou didst request?

*Salome*: I could ask for no more than such a dress. I would then vie with the maidens of Antioch and Alexandria. I might even capture the eye of Tiberius himself when he comes to his summer palace at Antioch. I hear he is to be there soon.

*Herodias*: Foolish child. Thou hast everything that thou dost need, but thou shalt have a dress of which thou shalt have no need to complain. Thy request to Herod should be something that money cannot buy.

*Salome*: Something that money cannot buy? There is nothing than money cannot buy. Nothing.

*Herodias*: Thou art mistaken. Money cannot buy the head of John the Baptizer.

*Salome*: But money will put poison in his food or corrupt the guard.

*Herodias*: Again thou art mistaken. Antipas has given strict orders for the safety of the Baptizer and hath threatened with death the prison guard and every person who in any way administers to the cursed man if aught happens to him. Besides, his own disciples carry his rude food of locust and honey.

*Salome*: Why dost thou hate him so?

*Herodias*: I despise him for talking about me; but I suppose I want him killed most because it is the only request that Antipas has ever denied me. That is the one thing that neither love nor money will buy. Thou must ask for the head of John the Baptizer.

*Salome*: Something that money will not buy! But, mother, I want the dress. It is the only chance I have to get one like it.

*Herodias*: Did I not tell thee that I would get thee a dress about which thou shalt have no reason to complain within the fortnight? Thou must ask for the head of John the Baptizer. It is the one thing that money will not buy.

*Salome*: I would not mind if I could get the dress. He is only a mad rustic anyway.

*Herodias*: I shall get the dress for thee. Promise me that thou wilt ask for the head of the Baptizer.

*Salome*: I promise. But I must go now.

*Herodias*: I shall walk to the door of the banquet hall with thee. (*Exeunt.*)

Scene 4: *Herod Antipas reclines at a table in the palace with some lords, high officials, and chief captains, celebrating his birthday with feasting and drunkenness. Salome is dancing before him.*

*Herod Antipas*: Thou art as beautiful as thy mother, Salome.

*First Official*: Her beauty is marvelous, your Excellency, and she excels the best trained dancers of the Greeks.

*Second Official*: Such skill should be well rewarded.

*Herod Antipas*: It shall be. When Herod Antipas is generous, he is generous. He hath not ruled these thirty years without good fortune, and no man may ever say that he is miserly.

*First Official*: Most men expect to receive gifts from their guests on their birthday. Thou dost dispense gifts to thy guests.

*Second Official*: Thou dost, indeed, like the Emperor himself.

*Herod Antipas*: No man is more generous than I toward those that please me. Watch me now. Salome, come here. Thou dost please me well. Thy beauty and grace excel that of the Greeks—is equal to that of the goddesses. How shall I reward thee? By heaven, I shall grant thy wish. Name to me the object of thy desire. By heaven, whatsoever, thou shalt ask of me, I will give it unto thee, unto the half of my kingdom.

*Salome*: According to thy generosity and thy oath, my lord, I ask the head of John the Baptizer on a charger.

*Herod Antipas*: The head of John the Baptizer! Thou art beside thyself. He is a prophet. Come, ask of me what thou wilt have.

*Salome*: I want the head of John the Baptizer. Give it to me here on a platter.

*Herod Antipas*: Foolish child! Thy mother hast told thee to ask for this. The head of the Baptizer will do thee no good. Ask for something for thyself. What wilt thou have?

*Salome*: I only want the head of the Baptizer, as I asked of thee.

*Herod Antipas*: But he is a prophet.

*Salome*: Remember thy oath, my lord.

*Herod Antipas*: On account of my oath, thy request is granted. Would that I had not made it. Soldier, bring the head of the Baptizer on a charger. (*Exit soldier.*)

*Chief Captain:* Your Excellency, thou hast reason to be happy over this foolish request. This man is only a trouble-maker, and his death is nothing. Think of the money that thou art saving. She might have asked thee for something that would have cost a fortune.

*Herod Antipas:* I would rather have given a fortune. Neither the olives, nor the wines, nor the dyes of Galilee are to be compared to a prophet—even though he is in prison.

*First Official:* I heard him preach once when he was at Enon, near Salim. He raved about the country going to the dogs because of the Greeks and Romans. He failed to see how prosperous it is with its new roads, new cities, travel, and thriving commerce.

*Chief Captain:* These fanatics have no care for law and order. Without the police protection of the soldiers, the outlaws would overrun the country.

*Second Official:* Why did he baptize?

*First Official:* He said that Messiah would come when the people had prepared his way by righteous living. The people who believe him confessed their sins and were baptized. I guess that most of them are living in their old ways again by this time.

*Chief Captain:* That reminds me. I have many soldiers from among the native Galileans. Some of them I dispatched into the wilderness where this man preached to keep order among the people and be on guard against robbers. These have been less restless and have not murmured so much about their wages since then. I wonder whether or not they made such a confession.

*First Official:* They are more likely to be plotting trouble against thee. They probably joined the Zealots while they were there.

*Chief Captain:* They seem sincere. Nevertheless, I shall keep them under surveillance. With this immediate expectation of a Messiah, only a spark may set the whole country into a conflagration that the Jordan itself could not quench.

*(Enter a soldier, bearing a big platter with the head of the Baptizer covered with a cloth.)*

*Soldier:* Thy order has been obeyed, your Excellency. Here is the head of the Baptizer. *(Herod accepts the platter with trembling hands and places it on the table before him.)*

*Herod Antipas:* Cursed be my oath, and cursed my folly that I should ever have made it. Nevertheless, ye bear me witness that I did this unwillingly. Because of my oath have I granted this foolish request and slain a prophet. May the curse of this deed be averted from the land—at least delayed for a generation. *(Lifts the platter)* Salome, foolish child, here is thy reward. Take it to thy mother that she may gloat over her victory. Better would it have been hadst thou asked something for thyself. *(Exit Salome bearing the platter.)*

*Scene 5: A desert place in Galilee. Several of John's disciples sit together talking.*

*First Disciple:* John, our master, is dead, killed by the cruel hand of Herod Antipas through the intrigues of Herodias, his kinswoman and unlawful wife. We no longer have a leader. Let us decide what we shall do.

*Second Disciple:* We shall find no other master like the Baptizer.

*Third Disciple:* 'Tis true, indeed. There was none greater.

*Second Disciple:* 'Tis said that he whom the Baptizer pointed out as the Lamb of God did bear like testimony. Only today was I talking with one of his followers who repeated to me his words.

*Third Disciple:* Make them known unto us.

*Second Disciple:* He told it unto me that the testimony was after the following manner: Thou hadst just re-

turned to bear witness to thy master in prison when he began to speak thus: What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appparelled, and live delicately, are in king's courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee." For I say unto you. Among those those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptizer: But he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

*Third Disciple:* It is, indeed, a noble testimony. "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptizer."

*Fourth Disciple:* That soundeth very well so far as it goeth; but the latter part is not to my liking. It is said that he from Nazareth teacheth that the kingdom of God is among men. That seemeth to say that our master hath no place in the kingdom of God and that his own followers are superior to him, even though they be not prophets. I like it not.

*Third Disciple:* Still, it is noble testimony.

*Fourth Disciple:* I like him not. Methinks he is a great deceiver.

*Second Disciple:* I agree not with thee. He hath paid the highest tribute to our master and preacheth almost the same gospel.

*Third Disciple:* He doth, indeed. Besides our Master believed in him and pointed him out as the Lamb of God and, under the inspiration of the Spirit, called him the Son of God.

*Fourth Disciple:* So he did. But even then he could not relate the Lamb of God with the Messiah; and after he was thrown into prison, he doubted it still more and sent two of us to ask him whether or not he was the

Christ or whether we should look for another. He was not certain.

*Second Disciple:* We must admit that he did have difficulty in relating those two offices; so do we all. Still, he supported Jesus as the Messiah and testified that Jesus must increase while he decreased, that it was of Jesus that he came to testify, and that his mission was to prepare the way for him.

*Fourth Disciple:* If Jesus were the Messiah, why did he not deliver the Baptizer? I still think that he is the great deceiver incarnate.

*Second Disciple:* But surely thou wilt not deny the testimony of our Master himself. He recognized Jesus as the Messiah.

*Fourth Disciple:* Art thou so sure? What were his words when thou didst report the answer of this Jesus to him in the prison cell? Did he say then that Jesus was the Messiah?

*Second Disciple:* I must confess that our master was much disturbed and said that his soul was troubled and that he could not see the light; yet, that he had followed the guidance of the Spirit in so pointing him out.

*Fourth Disciple:* This confirms my contention. Jesus was the great deceiver and by his skill he wrought upon our Master that he should make this declaration.

*First Disciple:* I agree with thy fellows that the Baptizer supported Jesus as the Messiah and think not that he was at all wrought upon. The question remaineth to us, however, as to what we shall do. I for one think we should seek the fellowship of our former companions who are followers of the Nazarene.

*Second Disciple:* It seemeth good unto me also. Large numbers of our former companions are to be found among the multitudes that follow him, and we shall find fellowship among them.

*Third Disciple:* Many have also gone into the East, for

his followers came from afar. But I, too, shall find a place among the followers of the Nazarene. It seemeth to me that is what our dead master would have us do. (*Turning to the Fourth Disciple*) What is thy thought in the matter?

*Fourth Disciple*: I, too, want to be true to the desires of our deceased rabbi. His own testimony impels me to deny the Nazarene. The follower of this great deceiver, I shall not become. I shall cross the Jordan and face the East. There will I gather others of our number who believe as I do, and we shall follow the teachings of our leader and teacher. Future generations shall find his teachings preserved and his greatness unshadowed by this deceiver of the West.

*First Disciple*: Thou wilt do well to come with us. It is said that the Nazarene hath the words of eternal life.

*Fourth Disciple*: The Baptizer taught the true gospel when he preached repentance for sin and demanded the fruits of repentance in the lives of his followers.

*First Disciple*: So also teacheth the Nazarene; but he excelleth our Master in the depth of his message. I am told that his words are life. Come with us. This our master would have us do.

*Fourth Disciple (rising)*: I am determined. With that one shall I have nothing to do. To this one shall I be true. (*Exit*).

*First Disciple*: Would that we might have continued together. But that could not be. Our shepherd was taken; his will that his sheep be not scattered is already disregarded. Still, it could not be otherwise. Like the fallen angel, he is leading many of the sheep of the Lord after him. Let us go now before other wolves enter the flock and scatter the sheep that they perish not. We shall find a new shepherd who will lead us by the springs of life. (*He rises and is followed out by the other disciples of the Baptizer.*)

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